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BENJAMIN DWYER

Joycean aesthetics and mythic imagination in the music of Frank Corcoran

(bababadalgharaghtakamminarronnkonnbronnntonnerronnntuonnnthunntrovarrhounawnskawntoohoochoordenenthurnuk!)¹

1. This is the word that appears in the opening stages of Joyce's *Finnegans wake*. It purportedly represents the symbolic thunderclap associated with the fall of Adam and Eve. See James Joyce: *Finnegans wake* (New York, 1976), p.3.

2. Declan Kiberd: 'Ulysses, newspapers and modernism', in Kiberd: *Irish classics* (London, 2000), p.470.

3. Between 1964 and 1967 Corcoran undertook extensive theological studies at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome. Following a personal crisis centred on a decision 'whether or not to go on within the church or proceed outside of it', he turned his back on official Catholicism. In 1895 Joyce (aged 13) was elected to join the Sodality of Our Lady at Belvedere College, Dublin. However, by the age of 16 he consciously broke away from the Catholic Church. Thereafter, he actively criticised it: in a letter dated 1904 he says, 'I make open war with it by what I write and say and do' (Richard Ellmann: *Letters of James Joyce*, vol.2 (New York, 1966), p.48). Corcoran's quotes are from an interview with Benjamin Dwyer conducted on 14 & 15 July 2013 at Pratoleva, Viterbo, Italy, as are all subsequent

JOYCE's symbolic thunderclap is a *maître-mot* in *Finnegans wake* and one of the keys to understanding Frank Corcoran's musical world. There is no Irish composer who has more consciously chosen Joyce as a natural ancestor, and fewer still who have been, like Joyce, so seduced as an artist in self-exile by Ireland's antagonistic pull. The psychological contradictions that inform the creative work of both are deeply embedded. Joyce, the most influential of literary modernists was entrenched in the Homeric tradition; Corcoran, Ireland's most unapologetic modernist composer, is obsessed with a pre-colonised, medieval Ireland. They both embody what Declan Kiberd describes as the 'double impulse of Irish modernism – to mask the modern in an outmoded form and to mask the ancient in a modern form'.² The work of both also emerges out of their shared and anguished rejection of Ireland's distinctive brand of Roman Catholicism – Joyce's 'senza confessione' is echoed by Corcoran's 'non serviam' – which resulted in existential traumas alleviated somewhat by their unshakable faith in myth's abiding significance.³

In this article I would like to explore points of convergence and difference in Corcoran's relationship to Joyce as a method of assessing the music of one of Ireland's most radical and individual composers. It will begin with an investigation of how deconstruction and assemblage, and the *sonus-logos-melos* nexus central to Joycean aesthetics form analogic relationships with Corcoran's music. Consideration will then be given to the way Corcoran's abstract works correlate to Joycean techniques of etymological and lexical invention (best exemplified by *Finnegans wake*), which often diminishes specificity of meaning as a method of metaphorising language. A paradox will be exposed, however, whereby the nature of Corcoran's abstract canvases allows for synaesthetic alliances to extra-musical phenomena such as violence and landscape. The two distinct Irish locales from which the works of each emanate – one rural, the other metropolitan – will also be discussed. An investigation of the political contexts of Corcoran's more programmatic music will show similarities in the ways both he and Joyce reject reified and

quotes unless otherwise stated. Joyce's quote appears in John McCourt,

ed.: *James Joyce in context* (Cambridge, 2009), p.231. In the 1911 Trieste census

Joyce declared his family 'senza confessione' ('without religion').

stylised versions of post-Independence Ireland for more multi-narrative readings. Finally, it will be shown how Corcoran more than any other Irish composer imbues his work with the mythic in ways analogous to Joyce. While Joyce creates a mythic Irish inner consciousness, in Corcoran's music, myth manifests itself in a re-imagined Gaelic-spiritual landscape.

The various processes of Joycean fragmentation and reassembly in language are perhaps the most immediate and observable influences on Corcoran's musical aesthetics. Joyce's invented neologisms are exemplary here, especially those that delve into Latin or Greek for their source material – the word 'morphomelosophopancreates' from *Wake*, for instance, is a wonderful neologism encapsulating the notion of 'flesh all shaped skillfully by music'; but it is reassembled from individual Greek words (*melos*, *sophos*, *pan* and *kreas*, meaning 'music', 'skilled', 'all' and 'flesh', respectively).⁴ Such linguistic fragmentation and reassembly manifest themselves in the methods by which Corcoran pieces together shards of musical material to develop content and create structure. The composer is nothing if not forthright in his acknowledgement of Joyce's abiding influence: he tells us that his work *Joycespeak – Musik* 'is "about" [Joyce's] phonemes and his musical themes, the aura of those knots of synaesthetic associations that transcend the logomyth divide'.⁵ Thus, Joyce's etymological experimentations are replicated in Corcoran's unique methods of dissection and restoration of word and melody. At certain points these distinct and converging creative approaches become indistinguishable from each other; hence Joyce's sonorification of text and Corcoran's verbalisation of sound.

Related to both is the notion of psychological and spiritual remembrance, a kind of Jungian, anthropological excavation that needs to pull asunder literature and music as a way of mining latent meaning in their exposed roots. The creative act of recovery, of piecing syllables and melody fragments back together again – often through unexpected juxtapositions and unique methods of contrapuntal interweaving – offers a potential for healing.⁶ As Stephen Dedalus states: 'There can be no reconciliation [...] if there has been no sundering.'⁷ Corcoran's entire oeuvre may thus be seen as an extended (Joycean) project of dissecting music and piecing the shards back together again in a creative cycle of 'sundering' and 'reconciliation' relating to the damage and destruction done to Ireland throughout its difficult history.

However, there are further technical connections between Corcoran and Joyce. As Boulez underscores, there is a motivation within Joyce's language that strives towards the condition of anonymity to a degree subsuming thematic material into the insular preoccupation of its etymological and structural experiment.⁸ This is a condition to which much of Corcoran's music consciously aspires. His sensitivity to the abstract-figurative dialectic is patent when he asks: 'Is the complex battery of percussion I use in my sole American

4. See Brian Arkins: 'Greek and Roman themes', in McCourt, ed.: *James Joyce in context*, pp.239–49.

5. Frank Corcoran: 'Back to the page: celebrating the text', at www.cmc.ie/features/back-page-celebrating-text.

6. Corcoran refers to his layering of distinct musical textures (as opposed to individual melodic lines) to create broader soundscapes as 'macro-counterpoint'. See John Page: 'A post-war "Irish" symphony: Frank Corcoran's Symphony no.2', in *Irish music in the twentieth century*, edd. Gareth Cox & Axel Klein (Dublin, 2003), pp.134–49.

7. James Joyce: *Ulysses* (New York, 1992), p.291.

8. Pierre Boulez: 'Sonate, que me veux-tu?', in Boulez: *Orientations* (London, 1986), pp.143–54.

9. Frank Corcoran: 'Music is a four-letter word', in *The Journal of Music in Ireland*, vol.1 no.3 (March/April 2001), p.19.

opus, *Music for the Book of Kells*, already ruined by centuries of use as symbols, clichés, atmosphere?' (ex.1).⁹ Such a concern, however, is ultimately addressed by the abstruse, self-reflexive anxiety of the symphonies and other similarly constructed instrumental works, which effectively attenuate all the

Ex.1: Frank Corcoran: *Music for the Book of Kells*, bars 98–99 (© Frank Corcoran and reproduced by kind permission of the composer)

♩ = c. 60

The musical score is for a percussion ensemble and piano. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system includes Chimes, High gong, Brake drum, Snare drum, Low bass drum, and Piano. The second system continues the percussion parts and includes a grand staff for the piano. The music is in 4/4 time and features various rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes. Dynamics range from *f* (forte) to *fff* (fortississimo).

recognisable narrativity that conventional elements of composition convey.¹⁰ They do this by dissolving such components of specificity into their organised coherence of atonal abstractions and internalised soundscapes. Corcoran claims: 'first and foremost my Second Symphony has to be about itself, about its parts and their relationships with the whole thing. The autonomy of art is the thing.'¹¹ The self-obsession of his music's post-tonal, arhythmic gestures, allied to a fluid dynamic of melodic sharding and assemblage, invigorates its insularity to a degree that largely denies outside referents or customary musical gestures. Corcoran's rejection of established compositional components as *applied* aesthetic tools in lieu of a process short-circuited to nascent, interior creative impulses accounts for the unpolished and dishevelled vernacular of his musical idiolect; its material is never quite reified by external, normative attributes such as style or idiom. However, what we lose in stylised sophistication, we gain in raw psychic and emotional authenticity, a uniquely 'autonomous and [...] absolute character hitherto unknown'.¹²

Furthermore, a Joycean tendency towards the condition of anonymity also impacts the character of Corcoran's structural frameworks. As I have outlined, in the symphonies and other instrumental works, musical discourse is driven by what might be described as gestures of non-specificity – Symphony no.3 is exemplary here. These musical utterances rely less on established rhythmic formulae, predetermined harmonic patterns, recognisable principles of melodic construction and mimetic motions of expression than upon spontaneous and irregular sequences of gestures that generate themselves directly out of instinctive emotional and psychological impulses that are essentially private in character. The unfolding of these energetic urges creates the structural character, or what Adorno calls the 'formal progress' of the music. Rather than being a pre-fabricated entity, the architecture of Corcoran's symphonies emerges out of that which has been structured by gesture.¹³

This encourages us to consider Corcoran's forms less as autonomous and paradigmatic components than as gestalten ensuing from musical impulses that are completely emancipated from predictable compositional discursivity and a shared programmatic narrativity. As Adorno clarifies, 'If musical structure or form [...] are to be considered more than didactic schemata, they do not enclose the content in an external way, but are its very destiny, as that of something spiritual.'¹⁴ In Corcoran's case, such spirituality emerges, I think, out of the music's coterminous relationship with personal and instinctive emotional and psychological impulses spontaneously articulated – the comparison here to Joyce's stream-of-consciousness writing is patent. Unmediated by the external filtering and reifying influences of normative compositional rhetoric and formal architectures, his creative responsiveness to these impulses gives his music a deeply humane quality.

10. While I argue here for Corcoran's distinctive 'anonymity' of style within the context of contemporaneous compositional practices, I go on to discuss his use of orchestration and extended techniques to create onomatopoeic suggestions of a narrative kind.

11. Corcoran: 'Music is a four-letter word', p.18.

12. Boulez: 'Sonate, que me veux-tu?', p.154.

13. Even in a more consciously structured work such as Symphony no.2, whose two movements – 'Soli' and 'Tutti' – are organised deliberately to allow the latter's 'controlled social "Tutti" space' to impose order on the former's 'primitive substance', the primal nature of the music is never successfully contained by architectural conceits. The order created is of a potential nature rather than an enduring one. See Page: 'A post-war "Irish" symphony'.

14. Theodor W. Adorno: 'Music, language, and composition', in Adorno: *Essays on music*, edd. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley, 2002), p.117.

Heretofore I have discussed how Joyce's portmanteau and internal-monologue methods have provided significant models for Corcoran's technical approaches to composition. Also common to both is a certain self-consciousness relating to the *modi operandi* of their respective creative endeavours. Through Dedalus, Joyce has spoken about 'forging in the smithy' of his soul 'the uncreated conscience' of his race. Corcoran has boldly stated that 'no Irish composer has yet dealt adequately with our past.' For both artists, permanent self-exile has had the dual impact of sharpening objective perceptions of Ireland while fostering an ache for remembrance and healing. Thus, foundational to their creative impulses is an extravagant, almost messianic desire to provide through their respective works ways of regenerating latent and unexpressed energies within the collective Irish psyche.

However, the extensive coterminous ground occupied by Joyce and Corcoran in relation to techniques and aesthetics does not preclude certain differences that exist between their creative approaches. While both reject the centrality and significance of Anglo-Irish representations of the Irish psyche, as attempted by the Irish Literary Revival, each focuses on different strands of society in their own projects to revitalise it. Aware that he could not penetrate the secrets of Irish rural life, Joyce concentrated his literary focus upon the milieu of pre- and post-Independence metropolitan Dublin. His themes centre upon the growing consciousness of middle-class Catholicism, its petit-bourgeois aspiration to emulate Ascendancy *mentalité*, and the socio-cultural suffocation of the emergent theocratic nation state. While a radical experiment in modernist literature from a formal perspective, *Ulysses* is also a damning critique of Ireland's religious, social and cultural stagnation while elements of prescribed nationalism and empire are also challenged in equal measure – the book's literary mythos thus creates a powerful alternative vision. As Richard Pine asserts, 'Myth, from the very first step of employing Homer as a template for the structure of *Ulysses*, imbued Joyce's writing and his own conscience with a facility to present fact, fantasy and fiction in the same literary optic.'¹⁵ While he is also astutely critical of Irish political and cultural malaise, Corcoran's artistic position differs radically from Joyce's in its recalibration of ethnic and cultural-spiritual landscapes. His attention evades the urban and the contemporary in favour of what Dedalus discards as 'medieval obstrusiosities'.¹⁶ It is these very 'obstrusiosities' that Corcoran wishes to resuscitate: lost Gaelic practices that predate, some extensively, the polity of modern life. *Music for the Book of Kells* is exemplary in this regard: 'This was my way of re-assessing Ireland – what was this little island I came from? Contemporary Ireland didn't interest me at all, nor does it today. But, by God, fifth- and sixth-century Ireland did. This was my big myth.' The renovation of lost

15. Richard Pine: *The disappointed bridge: Ireland and the post-colonial world* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2014), p.58.

16. Joyce: *Ulysses*, p.69.

cultural and spiritual practices thus forms the basis of Corcoran's project to re-imagine Ireland through music rich in mythic significance. I would now like to discuss some ways in which he achieves this.

WHILE I have argued that Corcoran's instrumental music largely strives for aesthetic anonymity and abstraction, there are occasions where figurative elements are consciously introduced. For example, the piano music that emerges near the end of *Music for the Book of Kells* intones fragments of Bach's Chorale melody *Es ist genug* (BWV 60) and the early medieval Irish plainchant *Ibunt sancti* appears in *Quasi una fuga* as an apparition in high harmonics (ex.2). Because of the dominance of abstraction in his musical canvases, and because such abstraction speaks no dialect, Corcoran knows that the slightest figurative references will have a disproportionate and thus powerful symbolic and mythical resonance. Such manipulation of the abstract-figurative dichotomy does not merely rely on Corcoran's use of simple juxtaposition; it can be traced to Joyce's distinctive etymological treatments, an observation of which exposes an intriguing paradox. Whereas Joyce's idiosyncratic handling of the denotational system of language is enacted as a basis for creating texts of increased plurivocal potential and even abstraction, Corcoran's abstract musical language occasionally forms the basis for the sonic exploration of potential narrativity and ethnic memory. How are such contradictions enacted?

As we have seen, the process of Joyce's etymological machinations has been one of deconstruction and assemblage, of 'sundering' and 'reconciliation'. Since the publication of *Ulysses*, these linguistic processes have received the philological attention of both structuralists and post-structuralists alike, as a result of an increasing awareness of language's embodiment of cultural meaning. On first observation it would appear that Joyce's linguistic processes comply with structuralist dicta. Roland Barthes, for example, suggests that '[t]he goal of all structuralist activity, whether reflexive or poetic, is to reconstruct an "object" in such a way as to manifest thereby the rules of functioning (the "functions") of this object'; and using a typically Joycean formulation, he concludes: 'Structural man takes the real, decomposes it, then recomposes it'.¹⁷ However, Joyce's distinctive process of recomposition creates textual relations whereby specific signifiers are not necessarily moored to specific signifieds.¹⁸ In such cases the result is a slippage in precise or literal denotation, an evasion, in fact, of the 'rules of functioning' (as Barthes would have it) in lieu of an increased extensiveness of linguistic meaning, association and even abstraction – a process that, elsewhere, has been aptly described in rather Joycean fashion as 'dislocations'.¹⁹ Concomitantly and contrastingly, in those works of

17. Roland Barthes: 'The structuralist activity', in Barthes: *Critical essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, 1972), pp.214–15.

18. This is a process more akin to poststructural thinking and one that supports those who would see Joyce as essentially postmodernist.

19. Fritz Senn: *Joyce's dislocations: essays on reading as translation*, ed. JP Riquelme (Baltimore, 1984).

Ex.2: Frank Corcoran: *Quasi una fuga*, T16–20, p.30 (© Frank Cocoran and reproduced by kind permission of the composer)

Quasi Una Fuga

[♩ = c.72]

The score is for a string ensemble and includes parts for Violin 1-10, Viola 1-4, Violoncello 1-3, and Double Bass. The music is in 4/4 time and features complex rhythmic patterns with triplets and sixteenth notes. Dynamics include *mf*, *ppp*, and *pppp*.

Violin 1

Violin 2

Violin 3

Violin 4

Violin 5

Violin 6

Violin 7

Violin 8

Violin 9

Violin 10

Viola 1

Viola 2

Viola 3

Viola 4

Violoncello 1

Violoncello 2

Violoncello 3

Double Bass

Corcoran's that are devoid of overt figurative quotation, techniques of onomatopoeia are skillfully manipulated to paradoxically root his essentially abstract music to a sensed locale or to invoke extra-musical phenomena. This is a contradiction that lies at the heart of Corcoran's work, about which I think he is aware: 'The music is about itself. Forget the composer's breakfast, mistress, death, bank account, experience as a youthful resistance fighter, they're all there too.'²⁰ That final 'they're all there too' verifies that Corcoran's music, while extolling a self-sufficient abstraction, also formulates a type of musical messaging and sonic phenomena that promote figurative association. The composer tells us even more pointedly that, in his Symphony no.2, the 'abstract' effect of bowing string instruments behind the bridge is in fact 'the barking of seals and human suffering'.²¹

Indeed, parsing this abstract-figurative nexus exposes a further interesting paradox and contrast pertaining to Joyce and Corcoran. The former's transcultural and translinguistic perspectives emerge out of an obsessive focus on the localised, insular dramas of the Irish capital. As he explains, 'For myself, I always write about Dublin, because if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities in the world.'²² However, the outward trajectory of this parochial-international relation is reversed in Corcoran's exploitation of European musical aesthetics as a means to direct attention on the rural particularities of his Tipperary childhood. In this regard he takes his cue from Bloom's internalised meditations in (of course!) the 'Sirens' chapter of *Ulysses*: 'Sea, wind, leaves, thunder, waters, cows lowing, the cattle market, cocks, hens don't crow, snakes hissss. There's music everywhere.'²³ Abstract sonorities within Corcoran's aesthetics, which nonetheless suggest extra-musical phenomena ranging from invocations of tribal violence and animal sounds to rugged landscape, are almost unique in Irish art music in that they avoid overt figurative association.²⁴ An inherent element of suppressed violence in this music unleashes hidden precincts where ineffable emotional and psychological traits find expressive release. While such sonic phenomena cannot be identified as specifically Gaelic, within the context of Corcoran's political, cultural and temporal locations, they do elicit an emergent sense of synaesthetic ethnic associations, archaic primitivism, psychological disturbance and even primal aggression that could be located convincingly within a medieval-Gaelic-rural-landscape paradigm. Refusing to restrict himself to limited and reductionist musical dialects, Corcoran creates an 'Irish' music entirely out of broader palettes of aesthetic sensibility and augmented emotional registers.

Corcoran's artistic character determines that when his abstract music invokes such ethnic imagery through the employment of onomatopoeia, it does so not through, for example, the soft 'vowel-meadow' sonority of Seamus Heaney's *Anahorish*, but rather through a raw and brutal realism

20. Corcoran: 'Music is a four-letter word', p.18. While this comment relates specifically to *Three pieces for orchestra: pictures from my exhibition*, I think that the paradox applies to much of Corcoran's instrumental output.

21. Page: 'A post-war "Irish" symphony', p.142.

22. Richard Ellmann: *James Joyce* (Oxford, 1982), p.505.

23. Joyce: *Ulysses*, p.421.

24. A number of early works by John Buckley such as *Oileáin* (1979) and *Boireann* (1983) achieve something similar at those moments when the music is less consciously under the external influence of Messiaen.

more closely akin to Heaney's other similarly titled townland poem, *Anahorish 1944* ('We were killing pigs when the Americans arrived/A Tuesday morning, sunlight and gutter-blood/Outside the slaughterhouse. From the main road/They would have heard the squealing,/Then heard it stop...'). I am not concerned here so much with the programmatic rural environment of Heaney's verse, but rather with the uncouth rawness of the subject matter and how the gritty alliteration might translate into music. Corcoran describes the 120 pigs, a boar and ten sows his mother kept as 'his first orchestra'. His natural ear for dissonance and angular, asynchronous rhythm may very well have been nurtured in this 'inharmonious' environment:

As a little kid I would carry the big heavy buckets of slop for the pigs, and the 'Berlin Pigharmonic Orchestra' would open up – a vast sound continuum from the deepest boar and sow tones up to the highest piccolo of the piglets. Even then I was thinking: 'God, if there was some way I could record this, manipulate it in some way, this would be great'.

Thus, the primal and native sounds of a rural childhood are the seeds of a music composed as an act of memory and recollection of those very kernels. Significantly, the recuperation is not idyllic – a transference of actual life into attractive, aestheticised art. Rather, this is musical memory that seeks to capture the raw emotional weight of an animal scream, to sound the scarring of an exposed landscape, to emit the psychological and emotional grief that informs its 'gutter-blood' aesthetics. From his earliest experiences as a child, an endless repository of sound was stored in Corcoran's mind to find release in the act of composition: 'I've magic memories there of natural sounds, of animal sounds. I still hear the scream of the sawmill in the local village. So there was magic realism and it's in the best work today – that energy flows in.'²⁵ Thus, while it might seem extravagant to suggest a coherent trajectory from rural cacophony to atonal soundscape (and vice versa), I am convinced by this idea of sonic recuperation from childhood memory – two minutes into Symphony no.3 we hear these high-pitched squeals and psychic screams unleashed from the snorting, animalistic groans of low brass (ex.3).

While synaesthetic associations of a medieval-Gaelic-rural-landscape paradigm can never be emphatically proven in relation to Corcoran's abstract music, they are obviously a central component of a number of his electroacoustic and multimedia works that employ archival recordings and other *objets trouvés*. A prime example is *Quasi una Missa*, a *musique concrète* mass in four movements: 'Kyrie', 'Gloria', 'Sanctus' and 'Agnus Dei'.²⁶ Culminating in its fourth movement, vocal fragments comprising text from various sources, disjointed phonemes, *objets trouvés* (recordings of 1950s Aran Islands keening and *port a'bhéil*),²⁷ paralinguistic material and angst-ridden screams are interwoven to create a sonic landscape of polyvocal complexity.

25. Jonathan Grimes: 'Interview with Frank Corcoran: looking back and looking forward', in *New Music News*, 2004, p.9.

26. at www.youtube.com/watch?v=z7nvDGYEwOC0.

27. Literally 'mouth music', *port a'bhéil* is a traditional form of song native to the Gaelic speaking areas of Ireland and Scotland. Also known as lilting, it originated where communities were repressed or desperately poor. It was often sung as a memory aid or as an alternative to instrumental music. Highly rhythmic and melodic, *port a'bhéil* uses non-verbal vocalisations extensively.

Ex. 3: Frank Corcoran: Symphony no. 3, bars 64–73 (© Frank Corcoran and reproduced by kind permission of the composer)

Tempo I^o

The musical score is for Frank Corcoran's Symphony no. 3, bars 64–73. It is written for a full orchestra. The key signature is one flat (B♭ major or E♭ minor) and the time signature is 3/4. The score is marked "Tempo I^o". The woodwinds (Piccolos, Oboes, Clarinet in E♭, Bassoons) and strings (Violins 1 & 2, Viola, Violoncello, Double Bass) are mostly silent throughout the excerpt. The brass section (Horns, Trumpets 1, 2, 3, Trombones, Tuba) and percussion (Timpani, Bass Drum) are the primary active forces. The Trumpets 1, 2, and 3 parts feature complex rhythmic patterns with many triplets and dynamic markings of *mf* and *f*. The Timpani and Bass Drum parts also feature rhythmic patterns with triplets and dynamic markings of *mf* and *f*. The score includes various performance instructions such as "(con sordini)" and "(senza sordini)" for the Trumpets, and "mf" and "f" for the percussion.

Ex.3 continued

Tempo II°

The musical score is for a full orchestra and strings. It is in 2/4 time and consists of 16 measures. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score includes parts for the following instruments:

- Piccolos 1, 2, 3: *ff*
- Oboe: *ff*
- Oboe: *ff*
- Clarinet in E♭: *ff*
- Bassoons 1, 2: *f*
- Horns: *f*
- Horns: *f*
- Trumpet 1: *f*
- Trumpet 2: *f*
- Trumpet 3: *f*
- Trombone: *f*
- Trombone: *f*
- Tuba: *f*
- Timpani: *f*
- Bass Drum: *f*
- Harp: *ff*
- Violin 1: *f*
- Violin 2: *f* *molto e nobile* *pizz.*
- Viola: *ff* *pizz.*
- Violoncello: *ff*
- Double Bass: *f*

The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (*ff*, *f*), articulation (*pizz.*), and performance instructions (*molto e nobile*). The tempo is marked *Tempo II°*.

Heard one moment as autonomous entities and the next as part of an overall sound structure, these interweaving elements create a sonic documentary of social and cultural practices. Vocal and guttural interjections by Corcoran and others, which are interpolated into the contrapuntal mix, represent verbalised meditations upon the ‘word’, the ‘sacred syllable’. The superimposition of identifiable verbal fragments with abstruse musical and vocal gestures, which creates a continuous modulation between semantic cognition and pure abstraction, is a thoroughly Joycean conceit. Even the cowbell sound that loudly and repeatedly intrudes into the dramatic action simultaneously conjures up abstract interjectory noise, rural life and church ritualism.

Indeed, ritualism is at the core of *Quasi una missa* and other similar works by Corcoran. Utterance is a central aspect, which seeks meaning in etymological deconstruction, a kind of composed Ursprache, which assumes a deep relationship between language and its referents – ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’.²⁸ If language has been cognised on the level of consciousness where the subject and the object meet, *Quasi una missa* is a meditation that attempts to unveil meaning not just through the utterance of words and their roots but also from whatever latent knowledge may be extracted from the purely sonic resonances these words, or fragments thereof, emit; thus, in *Quasi una missa*, music becomes mantra.

[I]t’s the deepest human utterance; God utterance from over two thousand years of Ireland’s God tradition, with all its crazy pathological and ecstatic forms from the god, Amhergin, who is ‘wind on sea’, as we know, right up to Bishop Berkeley, in the *Sanctus* [...]. At the end we have the utterances: *Deus est*: God is, God is not, God is beyond being – *plus quam*, which is Neoplatonic [...]. I use *plus quam*, and the very final utterance is reduced to ‘pl’. Of course, this is Joycean. The Gloria, for example, has the great theophanic thunder at the beginning, which I borrowed from *Finnegans Wake*.

Following a protracted engagement with the doctrines of official Catholicism, Corcoran ultimately rejected a life within the church: ‘even then, early on, I was disobedient – *non serviam* – I cannot, will not, see the voice of God in the stupid, deeply wrong, anti-luminary voice of a superior.’ However, for Corcoran this rejection of the church was not a rejection of the spiritual: ‘I was chasing God. In fact, I’ve been chasing God and the gods all my life.’ *Quasi una missa* therefore also represents Corcoran’s attempts to bypass official Catholicism so that he can make a direct short-circuit to the ‘voice of God’. We don’t have to make a connection between texts by Bishop Berkeley incorporated into the work relating to the death of a son and the tragic death of Corcoran’s own son to understand that *Quasi una missa* is a deeply personal statement. The work is a culmination of the composer’s spiritual quest spanning a lifetime.

28. John, 1:1.

However, the locus of this meditation is highly significant. In ‘chasing the ghost of Brendan’s mast’,²⁹ Corcoran is seeking a specific type of Christianity. In the constant questioning of what God is or is not – ‘*Deus est*: God is, God is not, God is beyond being’ – is a kind of apophatic theology, which underscores Corcoran’s long and troubled relationship to official Catholicism and the damage done to faith in the wake of profound personal tragedy. This explains why he rejects the present-day church shaped by Augustinian strictures in lieu of a medieval Gaelic, pre-Roman Christianity that speaks to him more directly. *Quasi una missa* is also then an attempt to recalibrate Irish Christianity as a spiritual phenomenon free from institutional constraint and hypocrisy. It is an endeavor to recuperate the mystical and the ecstatic as reflected in early Christianity’s absorption of pagan ritual as seminal components of a new vibrant mythology:

[Y]ou had the meeting of Christianity – a not-yet-fully-Roman Christianity, a native Christianity – and a strong native druidic culture. So you had this explosive mix, an explosive one hundred years of Irish shamanic saints: the big ones that came after Patrick, like Brendan (heading to America); Kevin of Glendalough; other huge world figures like Columba and Columbanus. A lot of this history went into my later work, *Quasi una Missa*.³⁰

This is why locus is such a central feature in so many of Corcoran’s works. An ancient Irish mysticism is conflated with the impoverishment of colonial Gaelic Ireland (as witnessed through keening and *port a’bhéil*) and Corcoran’s current, personal investigation of the godhead. By bringing these aspects into close temporal and spatial relationship, works such as *Quasi una missa* and *Music for the Book of Kells* are acts of redemptive imagination that seek to compensate for the despiritualisation inflicted upon Ireland first by Roman Catholicism, then by English (later British) colonialism, and then again by Roman Catholicism.

However, Corcoran’s use of overt references to socio-cultural practices within a rural Irish context also gives to works such as *Quasi una missa* a political agency. Because it is neither sanitised nor caricatured, Corcoran’s sonic recuperation of primal rural life has a deep ring of authenticity to it; though highly descriptive, it does not fall into programmatic traps. The work is a ritualistic meditation upon God, but exercised within the figurative contexts of ethnic Irish music, keening, bodhrán playing, *port a’bhéil*, and seán-nós singing and dancing. While these elements may bring the listener into rural homesteads, Corcoran never makes the fatal mistake of Orientalising the ethnic environment or idealising rural existence.³¹ He is far too cognisant of Ireland’s historical disenfranchisement under protracted colonial rule and the socio-cultural and economic depravity of post-Independence, theocratic governance to enter into the practice of shallow idealisation.

29. Patrick Kavanagh: ‘Memory of Brother Michael’, in *Collected poems* (London, 2004), p.118.

30. St Patrick (Patron Saint of Ireland, 387–461); St Kevin (498–618?); St Brendan of Clonfert (c.484–c.577); St Columba (Irish: Colm Cille, 521–597); St Columbanus (Irish: Columbán, 543–615).

31. See Edward W. Said: *Orientalism* (London, 1995).

This is a significant point, as the exaltation of rural life has been a central feature of both the Literary Revival and the propagandistic language of the emergent nation state. While sipping wine in country estates and Rathgar living rooms, Revivalists such as John Millington Synge, George Russell (Æ) and WB Yeats came very close to Orientalist practices in their reification of Irish peasantry. When Corcoran evokes rural life it is more akin to some of the poetic evocations of Patrick Kavanagh, who was acutely sensitive to the class differentials at the core of Revivalist *mentalité*. Kavanagh's retort to Synge's stage-Irish caricatures, Yeats's vision of essentialised serfdom and, for that matter, Éamon de Valera's 'peasant paradise' ideology is found in the uncensored realism of *The great hunger* and the brutal anger of 'Stony Grey Soil'.

Like Kavanagh, Corcoran's *Quasi una missa* does not replace an authentic rural experience with a reified image of Ireland, which is a creative stance that may very well be unique in Irish art composition. When integrating ethnic material into their work, Irish composers have largely tended to rejuvenate it within their own aesthetic languages in acts of positive retrieval that reify and aestheticise the raw material. Few composers employ traditional Irish music as a form of documentary realism, which both retains the 'aura' of that material and draws attention to the decimation it has undergone historically.³² Most Irish composers seek to extricate the ethnic sources from their colonised contexts. Indeed, just as the Orientalists did with Eastern music, some even treat the material as exotic and magical: one Irish composer's reference to the 'ecstasy (both luscious and dark)' of seán-nós songs comes dangerously close to this.³³

In stark contrast, Corcoran retains the indigenous state of ethnic sources and practices within his own de-aestheticised aesthetics; and he is empathetically concerned with the state of Gaelic culture both economically and spiritually. In this context, the Joycean fragmentation and assemblage of language and music can be viewed as an attempt to piece together again the sundered elements of a decimated society – language, song, dance, community, spirituality – dismantled by extensive colonial oppression and prohibitive Catholic edict. Thus, works such as *Quasi una missa*, *Music for the Book of Kells*, *Nine medieval Irish epigrams* (ex.4), and all the works in the 'Mad Sweeney'³⁴ sequence are essentially acts of recuperation, sonic gatherings of the elements of a lost cultural past and ghostly laments for a scarred and desecrated Gaelic civilisation.

Coda

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in

32. See Walter Benjamin: *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*, trans. JA Underwood (London, 2008). Roger Doyle's *Under the green time* (1995) for uilleann pipes and tape stands apart in its successful setting of traditional ethnic materials within the context of a quasi-industrial soundscape.

33. Donnacha Dennehy: *Grá agus Bás* (Nonesuch, 7559-79772-7).

34. *Buile Suibhne* (Mad Sweeney) is the story of the insane pagan king of Dál nAraidi, which may reach as far back as the eleventh century. However, the story appears in manuscripts dating from between 1671 and 1674. Combining poetry and prose, it is thought that *Buile Suibhne* was first written and disseminated between the 13th and 15th centuries. Corcoran has been repeatedly drawn to 'Mad Sweeney' in compositions such as *Buile Suibhne* (1996), *Sweeney's vision* (1997), *Sweeney's farewell* (1998), *Sweeney's wind-cries* (1999), *Sweeney's smitherens* (2000) and *Sweeney's total rondo* (2001).

Ex.4: Frank Corcoran: *Nine medieval Irish epigrams*, 'The sea', bars 1–15 (© Frank Corcoran and reproduced by kind permission of the composer)

Allegro molto *mf* *f* *p* Meno mosso Tempo I

Soprano 1
Look, look, wild and wide! North-east the tide The

Soprano 2
Look, look, wild and wide! the tide The

Alto
Look, look, wild and wide! North-east the tide be - neath which bide The

Tenor
Look, look, wild and wide! North-east the tide be - neath which bide The

Bass
Look, look, wild and wide! North - east the tide be - neath which bide The

dra-gons' brood! Mounts to full height! The sea's in flood!

dra-gons' brood! Mounts to full height! The sea's in flood!

dra-gons' brood! Mounts to full height! The sea's in flood!

dra-gons' brood! The seal's de-light Mounts to full height! The sea's in flood!

dra-gons' brood! The seal's de-light Mounts to full height! The sea's in flood!

pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.³⁴

This quote by TS Eliot provides the nature and context of the close relationship between Corcoran's musical aesthetics and Joyce's linguistic techniques that I have been outlining – deconstruction and assemblage as 'sundering' and 'reconciliation', the *sonus-logos-melos* nexus, etymological mining and a deep-seated need to provide new, renovated mythopoeic works that might give 'a shape' and 'a significance' to contemporary Irish history. While Joyce concentrated on creating a mythology from inner consciousness – what Kavanagh called Joyce's 'history of the soul', Corcoran's myths are concerned with locus and ritual.³⁵ They both exult, however, in the complexity of a postmodern multi-narrativity that problematises essentialised readings of the collective Irish spirit. Corcoran acknowledges Joyce's stream-of-consciousness subjectivity, plurivocality and simultaneous temporalities in his 'macro-counterpoint', *diversi tempi* and the superimposition of sound-image mixes from different eras. Their complex, multi-layered attributes provide new paths and outlets that belie the 'futility and anarchy' of contemporary life in general and Irish life in particular. Furthermore, as creative artists they are both automythologists: while Joyce portrays himself through Dedalus, Corcoran's cameo appearances in his own work come in the form of the outsider Mad Sweeney. With both artists, through creative depth and an inspired engagement with the social, cultural, political and spiritual elements within Irish history, automythology becomes communal myth. Corcoran pursues Joyce's deep reach into the Irish psyche through his intensely imaginative enquiry into core elements of early Irish mysticism. In so doing, he achieves for that distant Irish past and rural locus what Joyce did for early 20th-century metropolitan Dublin – an authentic re-imagining of time and place that is powerfully mythical and politically astute. Because Corcoran's music has indeed 'dealt adequately with our past' it stands as a rich and invaluable expression of our present.

34. A. Nicholas Fagnoli & Michael P. Gillespie: *James Joyce: the essential reference to his life and writings* (Oxford, 1995), p.64.

35. Patrick Kavanagh, in *Kavanagh's Weekly*, 28 June 1952, cited in Antoinette Quinn: *Patrick Kavanagh: born-again romantic* (Dublin, 1991), p.311.